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JOHN THE BAPTIST: THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE

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In addition to the fact that the ministry of John the Baptist is given a place of prominence in all our four gospels, it is the express testimony of Mark that the gospel story of Jesus Christ had its beginning in the work of the Baptist.¹ This opinion was general in the apostolic age,² and is probably to be traced to the explicit teaching of Jesus himself.³ The plain corollary of this is that an understanding of John is indispensable to a true appreciation of the work of Jesus.

At the time of John's advent the religious atmosphere of Israel was surcharged with fervent desire and hope. The nation was restless and daily prayed for the Messiah, so long promised and so long delayed. During the century and a half following the Macbean struggle the longing of the nation to hear again a prophet's voice⁴ with the word of the Lord had met some response. These messages are preserved for us in the books of Daniel and of Enoch, the Psalms of the Pharisees, the Assumption of Moses, and various other fragments and less important writings. Our third gospel preserves fragments from a group of pious folk who, at the time of the birth of Jesus, lived about the temple and were commonly accredited with the prophetic gift.⁵ But with these the heart of the nation was not satisfied. The expectation of neither prophet nor people had been realized. Chafing under Roman oppression and eager for

¹ Mark 1:1. ² Acts 1:22; 10:37; 13:24; 19:4.

³ Matt. 11:10, 13; Luke 7:27; 16:16.

⁴ 1 Macc. 4:46; 14:41. The Old Testament furnishes evidence that prophecy had in its last days degenerated and fallen into discredit (Zech. 13:2-6; Lam. 2:14; 4:13). Strangely enough, one of the last of the prophets regards the presence of the prophet as incompatible with the ideal messianic time (Zech. 13:2; cf. 13:4). This period was followed by a dreary time in which, perhaps partly in consequence of the disfavor in which it was held, there was such a dearth of prophetic activity that prophecy was commonly believed to be extinct (Ps. 74:9; 1 Macc. 9:27; cf. Lam. 2:9).

⁵ Luke 1:67; 2:25, 36; cf. 2:38.

deliverance, the nation searched its sacred writings⁶ to learn what Jehovah had really promised for his people. The answer it received was not altogether clear. Apparently there was found reason to expect, not only the Messiah, but also Elijah⁷ and the prophet promised by Moses.⁸ If Jehovah would not send his Messiah, he would surely send some one to the nation to reveal to it his purpose and relieve its tension of uncertainty and eagerness.

Into such a nation and at such a time John was born. By parentage he was a "Hebrew of Hebrews," of the stock of Aaron,⁹ the proud and exclusive, aristocratic priestly line. From the very first he was intimately connected with the religious life of the nation, and came to know both its faults and virtues, its fears and its hopes. Perhaps it was his intimate and growing knowledge of the officialism of the priests and the formalism of the Pharisees that drove him into the desert.¹⁰ Whatever may have been his motive, he left his city home in the Judean hills¹¹ and received discipline for his prophetic activity for the most part in solitude. By study and reflection and observation he was preparing for his task. It is extremely improbable that during this time he had any relations with the Essenes or was influenced by them. The gospel portraiture of John and Josephus' description of the Essenes,¹² although not unlike in some points, exhibit differences of a radical and decisive character. The conviction of duty sent John to the deserts, and the divine spirit of truth was his teacher while there. At this fountain he found not only his own life, but also divine inspiration for his special work. In obedience to this divine leading, one day, when about thirty years of age,¹³ John left his solitude to enter upon his work before the nation. Clothed in the rough garb of the prophet,¹⁴ a man of rigorous and austere life,¹⁵ bound by the vow of the Nazirite,¹⁶ he came "in the

⁶ See, e. g., 4 Ezra 12:11, 12 ff.; cf. John 5:39, and next note.

⁷ Mal. 3:1; 4:5, 6; Mark 9:11; Matt. 11:14; 17:10; John 1:21; cf. Luke 1:17.

⁸ Deut. 18:15, 18; John 1:21, 25; 6:14, 30, 31; 7:40; cf. Matt. 11:3; 21:11. The early church found this promise fulfilled in Jesus. Acts 3:22; 7:37; cf. John 1:45.

⁹ Luke 1:5, 6; cf. 1 Chron. 24:1, 10.

¹⁰ Luke 1:80.

¹¹ Luke 1:39.

¹² Wars, II, 8, 2-13; *Antiquities*, XVIII, 1, 5. ¹³ Cf. Luke 1:36 and 3:23.

¹⁴ Mark 1:6; Matt. 3:4; Zech. 13:4; 2 Kings 1:8. ¹⁵ Matt. 11:8; Luke 7:25.

¹⁶ Numb. 6:2-4; Matt. 11:18; Luke 7:33; Luke 1:15; cf. Mark 1:6; Matt. 3:4.

spirit and power of Elijah"¹⁷ to bring the message of righteousness and repentance to the nation. To the divinely prepared people had come the divinely appointed and prepared messenger. We may best consider the work of this messenger in three phases: first, the proclamation of the coming of the kingdom, and the demand for repentance; secondly, the announcement of a Coming One; thirdly, the identification of this Coming One.

1. That which brought John to proclaim his message to the people at this particular time was the conviction, divinely begotten, that the long-looked-for kingdom of Jehovah was imminent.¹⁸ This conviction he heralded to the nation which, on the *qui vive*, welcomed it, as an answer to smothered groans and prayers. Although John did no sign¹⁹ in attestation of his authority, the intensity of his conviction and his prophetic bearing aroused the people to a high pitch of interest and excitement. As the multitudes came flocking from city and country throughout the district where John was preaching, they found that with his annunciation of the coming kingdom he combined also the demand for repentance, as a preparation for participation in its blessings. The Pharisees and Sadducees, and perhaps many of the common people as well, met this demand, as they were wont to do,²⁰ with an insistence upon their prerogative to share in the blessings of the kingdom because of their Abrahamic descent. John declared, therein anticipating Jesus and Paul, that the question of ancestry was a wholly irrelevant one. If God chose, he could create children of Abraham even out of the stones lying about their feet. He reiterated his demand for repentance and reinforced it by reference to the imminency of the peril to which the impenitent were exposed. As John moved about from place to place,²¹ he came into contact with many different classes of people. He was not content with a general demand upon these for repentance, but indicated to each of the various classes the particular application of the demand to its own case. "Each class should forsake its besetting sin, and all should do their duty by their neighbor." Many

¹⁷ Luke 1:17; Matt. 11:14. ¹⁸ Cf. Luke 2:26, 38. ¹⁹ John 10:41.

²⁰ John 8:33, 53; Jas. 2:21; Gal., chap. 3; 4 Ezra 6:56-58; Josephus, *Antiquities*, III, 5, 3; *Wars*, V, 9, 4.

²¹ John 1:28; 3:23, 26; 10:40.

of the common people accepted John's demands,²² and some of the rulers, but many of them turned away²³ from him in disgust. It was in prosecution of this work as preacher of repentance and righteousness that John came into contact with Herod. Where he met Herod, and under what circumstances, it is quite impossible to say. We only know that in the presence of royalty he was the same fearless prophet, and regardless of consequences rebuked the ruler for his sin. Herod was stung by the public censure of conduct which his own conscience condemned, and, for this cause, as well as for fear of the political effect which such a bold attack upon his majesty might have if unchallenged,²⁴ cast John into prison. Here he languished until released by death. In addition to his public work, John appears also to have given some attention to the more private instruction of those who became his disciples.²⁵

The work of John as a preacher was sealed by the rite of baptism. Appropriating a ceremony which was already known to the Jews, he immersed in water those who gave satisfactory evidence of repentance. With John the ceremony acquired new significance. This fact is obviously the occasion of the question as to his right to use it,²⁶ and it was from his peculiar use of it that he gained his distinctive title, "the Baptist,"²⁷—a title so distinctive that even Josephus explicitly distinguishes him by it.²⁸

2. But there was another main element in the message of John. He had only well begun his clarion call to the people when "all men began to reason in their hearts concerning him whether haply he was the Christ" or one who should precede the Christ.²⁹ In reply to questioning, John declared that he was only a voice in the wilderness.³⁰ His personal identification was of no moment, for he had no significance, except as he prepared the way for one who should come after him. He was not even worthy to be the slave of this Coming One,³¹ of whose work his own was but a symbol and a shadow.

²² Luke 7:29.

²³ Luke 7:30; Matt. 21:25; John 7:48; 12:42.

²⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, 5, 2.

²⁵ Luke 11:1; cf. Mark 2:18.

²⁶ John 1:25; cf. Zech. 13:1.

²⁷ Mark 6:14, 24; Matt. 3:1; Mark 8:28; Luke 7:20.

²⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, 5, 2.

²⁹ Luke 3:15; John 1:20.

³⁰ John 1:23.

³¹ Mark 1:7; Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:27.

Whether by this Coming One John had specifically in mind the Messiah he does not say, although, in the light of succeeding events, his words have ever since been so interpreted. According to the record given in the fourth gospel, it is his explicit testimony that when he began preaching he had absolutely no knowledge of whom the Coming One was to be.³² In the light of this statement of John himself, the fact that Israel was expecting more than one to come, the fact that John's most specific characterization of the one whom he expects, even when questioned³³ by the people, is the Coming One, and, above all, the fact that the people are in doubt whether he or someone to follow is the Christ,³⁴ it is exceedingly questionable whether, at this time, John made specific prediction of the coming of the Messiah.³⁵

What was to be the character of the Coming One whom John announced? The testimony of the synoptic gospels on this point is uniform and clear. John had astounded and alienated the nation by his declaration that the advent of the kingdom was not to bring them blessing and glory, but judgment—a judgment to be avoided only by true penitence. He further declared that the Coming One was to execute this judgment. John's baptism of repentance was only a symbol of that deeper work of purification and discrimination to be wrought by the Mightier than he. Those who met this test should have entrance into the kingdom of blessing, but those who failed should meet at his hands a punishment swift, unrelenting and terrible. The ax already lay at the root of the tree, the fan was already in the hand of the Mighty One, the terrifying judgment was imminent. The conception reflected in the fourth gospel differs from this. When John pointed out to his followers one whom he identified as the Coming One he had announced, he called him the Lamb of God which bears (takes away) the sin of the world. The context contains not even a suggestion of judgment. The conception is akin to, and perhaps is derived from, Isaiah, chap. 53. There is here no judge stern and unrelenting, but a gentle sufferer who in

³² John 1:31, 33. ³³ Luke 3:15; John 1:23, 27; John 3:28.

³⁴ Cf., in addition to the references in the preceding note, Luke 1:76.

³⁵ John 3:28 is spoken after John has identified Jesus as the Coming One and Jesus has begun his work.

meekness and silence bears the sin of others. How are we to account for the difference in representation? It should not escape our notice that the conception reflected in the synoptic gospels is that which John entertained at the beginning of his labors, before he had come into contact with Jesus. It is the conception which he would naturally hold to on the basis of his knowledge of the general Old Testament expectation and the ordinary messianic hope of his time. The conception which is reflected in the fourth gospel is that which he possesses after he has come into contact with Jesus in the experience at his baptism. It is also probable that Jesus had undergone his great temptation, had settled the lines of his ministry, and had perceived and spoken to John of the struggle and its final issue for himself. It may also be true that the writer of the fourth gospel uses specific terms which for himself and readers had displaced the earlier terms of common usage, and into which there had, in the light of the history from John to the evangelist, come a content which the terms actually used by John did not and could not contain.³⁶ John spoke only in the twilight, the evangelist in the full noonday of the Light of the World.

3. It is already implied in what has just been said that John identified Jesus as the Coming One he had expected and announced. The testimony of the fourth gospel on this point is persistent and uniform, and it is probably implied in John's question sent to Jesus from prison.³⁷ There seems in the question not only inquiry, but also disappointment. Jesus' reply suggests that he thinks earlier conversation with John should have prepared him to expect the kind of work Jesus is doing. John had no intimation of the particular person who should come according to his proclamation, although he was in some measure prepared for his identification, before Jesus' baptism.³⁸ This is not to say that he had no personal knowledge of Jesus, and it is difficult to understand Matt. 3:14, 15, if he had not. But, be that as it may, it was the experiences at the time of Jesus' baptism that certified to John that Jesus was the Mighty One he had announced. On the basis of these experiences, John witnesses to Jesus before the nation and before his own disciples, six of whom

³⁶ This statement applies also to John 1:34, 41, 45, 49.

³⁷ Matt. 11:3; Luke 7:19.

³⁸ John 1:31, 33.

probably became the first choice of Jesus for his Twelve. Our data do not, however, warrant the conclusion that this testimony was decisive and unqualified, or John's conviction unhesitating and constant. The gospels nowhere record that Jesus had made a declaration of his messiahship to John, neither do they assert that John had affirmed the messiahship of Jesus in wholly unambiguous terms. John's conduct in continuing to gather disciples³⁹ and his message from prison alike find their natural explanation in a lingering question in John's mind, not as to the character, but as to the official standing of Jesus. Was he really the Coming One, or only a greater than himself, like him preparing the way for the Messiah? The doubt of his prison days was of more than a day's duration. It was this doubt, we must believe, that made him "less than the least in the kingdom."⁴⁰

Yet, in spite of this limitation, John deserves a place in the "Hall of Fame" for heroes of faith. It was to him and through him that Jehovah made proclamation of the coming of his kingdom of righteousness. It was his spiritual vision and faith, not John's or Peter's or Paul's, that discerned the nearness of the kingdom and the Mighty One. He, not they or another, actually prepared the way for the Messiah. His nation widely hailed him as a prophet,⁴¹ and the Greater One said that he was more than a prophet. His ministry is the "beginning of the gospel." The work of no other man can rightly claim equal distinction. The Master himself said that of those born of women there has arisen no greater.

³⁹ That John continued gathering disciples is the clear testimony of many passages in the gospels and Acts. See, for example, Mark 2:18; 6:29; Luke 5:33; 7:18, 19; Matt. 9:14; 11:1, 2; 14:12; John 3:25, 26; cf. 3:22, 23; Acts 18:25; 19:1-5.

⁴⁰ Matt. 11:11; Luke 7:28.

⁴¹ Mark 11:32; Matt. 11:9; 14:5; 21:26, 46; Luke 7:26; 20:6; cf. 3:2.